

TITLE IV-E INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMS: A DECADE IN REVIEW



*Helping Young People
Prepare for Their Future*

Executive Summary

November 1999

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



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FOREWORD

Each year tens of thousands of adolescents “age out” of foster care and take on new responsibilities as they learn to live independently of the child welfare system. For all teenagers, the transition to adulthood is complex; for these teenagers it can be particularly challenging.

The Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) recognizes the critical need to prepare youth effectively for both the challenges and the opportunities that lie beyond emancipation. Through the Federal Independent Living Program (ILP), ACYF supports State child welfare agencies in providing services that help youth 16 and older build the skills needed to achieve self-sufficiency.

Based on a review and analysis of 10 years of final reports submitted by all States to ACYF, this report creates a national picture of the youth served during the first decade of ILP (Fiscal Years 1987 – 1996). The report describes the array of ILP services provided to youth and highlights trends and service approaches in the areas of educational and vocational training, employment, budgeting, housing, mental health, health care, and youth involvement. Program achievements and recommendations for continued improvement also are identified.

We should look to the “lessons learned” from the first decade of ILP as we move ahead with the national discussion on youth leaving foster care. The report’s findings provide a foundation for understanding ILP that will support advancements in policy, practice, research, and reporting.

On behalf of ACYF, I wish to express my appreciation to the Independent Living Coordinators and other State and ACF Regional Office staff who administer ILP services and have contributed to the program reports that were central to this study. ACYF also thanks the many individuals whose hard work and dedication made this report possible.

Patricia Montoya
Commissioner
Administrator on Children, Youth and Families

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The views expressed and recommendations suggested in this report are those of the study team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Health and Human Services.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) Independent Living Program (ILP) supports the provision of services to help youth prepare for the transition from living within the child welfare system to living on their own as healthy, safe, and productive adults. This study is a review and analysis of ILP final reports and related materials from all 50 States and the District of Columbia from the inception of the Federal program in Fiscal Year (FY) 1987 through FY 1996.

Approximately one-third of the nearly 500,000 children in out-of-home care are teenagers. Each year, approximately 20,000 youth between the ages of 18 and 21 emancipate or "age out" of care. As youth are discharged from care, they face new responsibilities for their own economic independence and general well-being. To prepare for living self-sufficiently, these youth must develop an understanding of, and build skills needed to:

- Pursue or complete their education or vocational training
- Obtain and maintain employment (e.g., learn how to prepare a resume, conduct a successful interview, develop on-the-job skills, communicate effectively with supervisors)
- Locate and maintain affordable housing (e.g., learn where to look for an apartment and how to complete a lease)
- Manage their money and keep a budget
- Cook meals, keep house, and perform other "daily living" routines
- Access health care and community services.

In addition to the necessary concrete skills and supports, youth also need to continue developing their social and interpersonal skills and building their confidence and self-esteem.

1. THE FEDERAL INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM

The Federal Independent Living Program (ILP) was initiated to enable child welfare agencies to respond to the needs of youth emancipating from foster care and assist them as they prepared for independent living. The ILP was first authorized by Public Law (P.L.) 99-272 in 1986, through the addition of section 477 to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (the Act). The Act provided funds for assisting youth age 16 and older who have been or are in foster care to make the transition to becoming self-sufficient adults. In subsequent years, amendments were made to increase the level of funding (\$70 million appropriated annually since FY 92), expand

the population eligible for services, and promote the integration of ILP with other State child welfare programs. Between FY 1987 and FY 1996, a total of \$559.4 million was expended under the ILP.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA LIMITATIONS

The purpose of this study was to review and analyze data collected and reported in 10 years of ILP final reports and related materials. The study team reviewed and extracted data from 464 final reports and report checklists from all 50 States and the District of Columbia from FY 1987 through FY 1996. The ILP materials reflected significant data limitations:

- Non-standardized reporting formats, which resulted in reports that varied widely in terms of content, depth, breadth, and methodology
- A lack of consistent definitions of terms, including concepts such as “served,” “eligible,” “completed services,” “needs assessment,” “counseling,” and “aftercare”
- Inconsistencies in data reported across States and within States (across counties or across years)
- Differences in the timeframes used for collecting and presenting data (e.g., data regarding youth eligible for services, outcome data)
- A lack of information regarding the scope, intensity, and duration of different types of services, and the number of youth served by each
- Difficulties tracking youth to collect outcome data following discharge.

The missing and inconsistently reported data necessitates that the aggregated data be viewed cautiously. Despite the limitations and caution in interpretation, however, the data collected and analyzed can help to create a valuable picture of ILP services and activities and a sense of the trends and changes over time.

3. NUMBER OF YOUTH SERVED

Approximately 67,600 youth were served¹ in FY 1996, more than 2½ times as many as were served in FY 1989.² The number of youth served annually per State varies greatly from fewer than 10 to more than 9,000 youth. Not surprisingly, States maintaining large foster care caseloads and receiving more ILP funding tended to serve more youth. In FY 1996, 10 States (New York, California, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas, Tennessee, Missouri, and Minnesota)—each serving from 2,000 to 8,000 youth—accounted for more than 50 percent of the youth served.

Data suggest that many of the youth eligible for services over the decade did not receive ILP services. In 30 States that reported such data in FY 1996, more than one-third (37%) of the total youth eligible for services did not receive any services.³

In FY 1996, an estimated average of \$983 of Federal funds was expended per youth served under the ILP. In comparison, the estimated average expenditure per youth served under the ILP in FY 1989 was \$1,674. While the total amount of ILP funds allocated to States from FY 1992 through FY 1996 remained fixed at \$70 million, on average States served additional youth each year.

4. DEMOGRAPHIC AND CARE CHARACTERISTICS

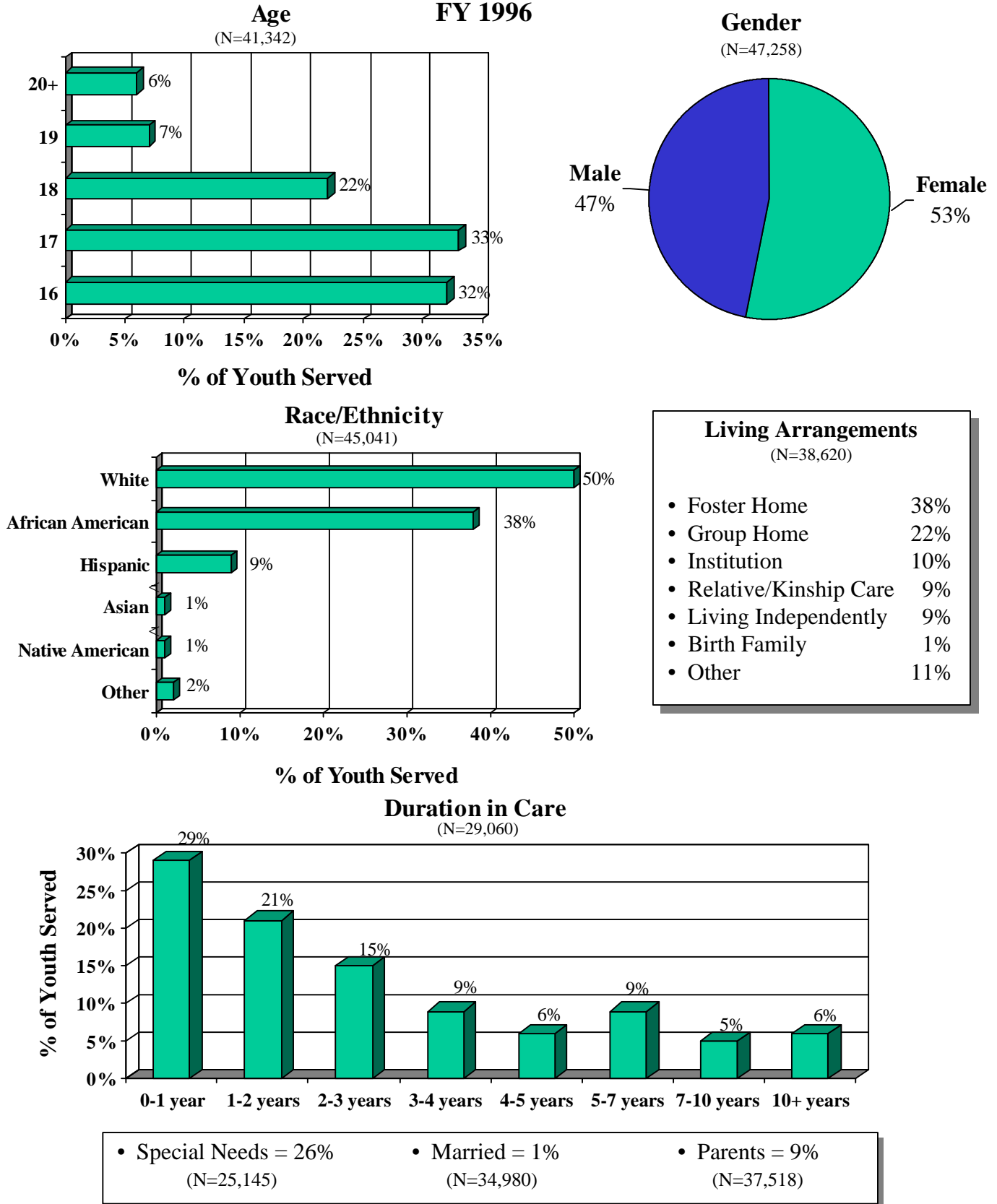
Youth demographic and care characteristics as reported by States for the most recent year studied, FY 1996, are summarized in Exhibit 1. Data on youth served by ILP in FY 1996 indicate:

¹ The numbers of youth served by fiscal year presented throughout the Executive Summary and Findings Report are based on the data provided in State ILP final reports. Where data on the total number of youth served were not available or not clearly reported, estimates were generated based on (1) State projections indicated in ILP plans or reports; (2) The number of youth eligible for services; and/or (3) trends in the number of youth served across adjoining years for that State. The number of youth served (reported) differs from the estimated number of youth participating in the ILP provided in the *Green Book* of the Committee on Ways and Means, U.S. House of Representatives. The latter was based on projections from State ILP plans.

² Comparisons use FY 1989 as the beginning reference point rather than FY 1987, the program's inception, because the early years were dedicated to program set-up rather than service delivery, and because data were frequently unavailable for the early years.

³ When interpreting aggregated data regarding the number eligible and served, it is important to note that significant differences exist across States in terms of definitions of "served" and "eligible."

EXHIBIT 1 PROFILE OF YOUTH SERVED*



* Total estimated number of youth served for FY 1996 is 67,564. Number of youth for which characteristic data were known (N) are indicated.

- Approximately one-third of youth served (32%) were 16 years old, and one-third (33%) were 17 years old; 22 percent were 18 years old and the remaining youth were either 19 years old (7%) or 20 and older (6%).
- Slightly more than half (53%) of the youth served were females.
- White youth made up the highest percentage of youth served (50%), followed by African-American youth (38%) and Hispanic youth (9%). Asian youth and Native American youth each represented approximately 1 percent of youth served.
- Half of the youth served (50%) were in care less than 2 years. One out of five youth were in care more than 5 years.

Approximately one-quarter (26%) of youth served were reported as having special needs, and nearly one-tenth (9%) were parents or pregnant. Demographic and care characteristics were fairly consistent over the 10-year period.

5. SERVICES

Over time, States provided a wide range of services to youth in care addressing the areas of educational and vocational support, career planning and employment services, housing and home management, budgeting, health care, mental health and well-being support services, and youth involvement. In later years, more States offered services in every service category examined. In particular, large increases were noted in post-secondary educational support, purchase of educational and career resources, home maintenance, personal care (e.g., hygiene, nutrition, and fitness), medical care and education, teen parenting classes, substance abuse education, and youth advisory boards and newsletters. Over the 10-year period, States generally moved from concentrating primarily on concrete tangible skills (e.g., vocational training, job search, and money management) to also addressing important intangible skills (e.g., decision-making, communication, and conflict resolution).

6. OUTCOMES

The short- and long-term outcomes for youth served under the ILP are areas of great interest and major challenges for States. Outcome data collected by States for the final reporting process is problematic due to inconsistencies in definitions, differing time periods measured, and difficulties tracking youth after they exit from care. Several supplementary State ILP outcome studies suggest that after exiting care, many youth had difficulties completing educational goals, maintaining jobs, achieving financial self-sufficiency, paying for housing expenses, and accessing health care.

7. REPORTING AND RESEARCH ISSUES

To improve the quality of national data available regarding ILP, this study strongly supports the implementation of more standardized ILP reporting. While many States produced informative final reports that provided substantial detail regarding their multi-faceted ILP activities and the youth served by them, the inconsistencies evident *across* States make it difficult to aggregate national data precisely. As the program moves forward, substantial opportunities exist for improving these data to enable more sound calculations of national figures, easier assessment of program activities, and enhanced information sharing across States. Improvements in reporting will rely on building consensus around essential items to be addressed in ILP reports, developing common definitions, and providing detailed reporting guidelines. The development of new reporting requirements must consider the balance between consistency and State flexibility and also between the “quest for information” and the burden placed on States to collect and record such information.

Recommendations to Improve ILP Data and Reporting:

- Convene a working group to address reporting issues, build consensus around essential items to be included in State final reports, and design standardized reporting requirements. The working group should include representatives from the Children’s Bureau, ACF Regional Offices, State IL Coordinators, national organizations that address independent living issues, and researchers.
- Develop, pilot test, and disseminate structured reporting forms and clear guidelines based on a core series of priority ILP data elements with specified formats and common definitions.
- Encourage States to relate objectives stated in their applications with the performance and achievements recorded in the final reports. Monitor progress against stated objectives.
- Promote electronic data collection.
- Offer States technical assistance on data collection and provide feedback following report submissions.

The field would benefit not only from more data collection on outcomes for youth served but also more rigorous evaluation of which types of services and program models lead to more positive outcomes for youth. In addition, ILP program and staffing characteristics also lend themselves to further research. While reports frequently noted staff limitations and turnover, little data is available regarding the impact of staffing on the quality of services delivered.

Recommendations to Improve Data on Program Effectiveness and Outcomes for Youth Served:

- Build State capacity in collecting and analyzing outcome data through training and technical assistance. Help States identify ways to track youth over time.
- Develop guidelines for annual collection of a select and well-defined group of outcomes that reflect mastery of skills, education, employment, housing attainment, and other indicators of self-sufficiency.
- Encourage States to track and report the progress of youth in meeting goals specified in their individual needs assessments and case plans related to independent living.
- Support longitudinal studies by external evaluators to provide needed insight into the effectiveness of various ILP services and their long-term impact on youth self-sufficiency.
- Conduct additional research to assess ILP staffing issues, understand causes and consequences of ILP Coordinator turnover, and develop a list of appropriate ILP staff competencies.

8. POLICY AND PROGRAM ISSUES

Through the review and analysis of ILP final reports from FY 1987 through FY 1996, a number of common themes emerged. These themes are discussed below, along with recommendations for future ILP policy, practice, and research. Recommendations have implications for both Federal and State program implementation.

Expanding Services. Over the decade in review, ILP services expanded significantly both in the number of youth served and in the types of services provided. Nonetheless, data regarding the number of youth served as a percent of the number eligible for services indicated that many States only served a fraction of those who may have benefited from such services.

Recommendations to Facilitate Expanding Services:

- Increase Federal funding of ILP to enable States to keep pace with the growth in the eligible population and to provide more comprehensive services.
- Update ILP funding allocation formulas to account for State changes in foster care population since 1984.
- Explore further the reasons for allocated yet unobligated ILP funds, work with States to overcome obstacles to expending allocated funds, and develop mechanisms to reallocate unexpended funds to other States or subsequent years' ILP activities.
- Conduct evaluation studies to assess which services are the most effective in preparing youth for self-sufficiency.

Supporting Independent Living as a Continuous Process. To support a more effective continuous learning process, States underscored the need to start ILP services earlier (by lowering the eligibility age restriction) and continue them longer (through aftercare programs). Foster parents and mentors also play an important role by supporting the ongoing process of learning independent living skills.

Recommendations to Promote Independent Living as a Continuous Process:

- Expand ILP services and formal program support to youth age 18 to 21.
- Increase provision of training to foster parents, birth families, and other caregivers on the needs of adolescent youth and integrate these key players into ILP service delivery. Use State Title IV-E training funds to increase training for caregivers on addressing independent living concepts and building appropriate decision-making skills of teenagers.
- Support pilot demonstration programs, with evaluation components, for formal ILP services for youth under age 16.
- Promote greater coordination within child welfare agencies of permanency planning, adoption, and independent living units. Encourage adoption opportunities for adolescents through staff education, policy and practice changes, and public outreach.
- Work with youth to identify appropriate mentors and support networks that can provide ongoing support following discharge from care.

Providing Experiential and “Hands-on” Activities. Over the decade, programs increasingly promoted “learning by doing” rather than relying solely on classroom instruction. Supervised living or “practice living” programs of various time periods were increasingly adopted as a means for providing valuable experiential learning, but were limited due to ILP restrictions prohibiting use of Federal ILP dollars for room and board.

Recommendations to Promote Experiential Learning in Supervised Environments:

- Allow States to allocate some of their Federal funding, matched by State funds, for room and board to enable expanded supervised living programs.
- Develop guidelines on eligibility criteria (e.g., enrollment in school, employment) for youth participation in supervised living programs.
- Conduct evaluation studies to assess outcomes of different supervised living models.
- Expand use of tuition waivers that encourage youth to attend college or vocational programs and continue building valuable educational and independent living skills in a structured environment.

Addressing the Needs of Special Populations. Once the foundation for ILP services was set, States placed increased emphasis on the needs of special populations, including youth with disabilities, youth who were pregnant or parents, youth with substance abuse issues, and youth who were involved with the juvenile justice system. Given the added challenges that these youth may face as they make the transition to independence, increased specialized services appears vital. Another important facet of helping diverse populations is encouraging youth to understand and take pride in their culture and background.

Recommendations to Address the Needs of Special Populations:

- Conduct assessments within States to identify the specific needs of various sub-populations of youth (e.g., youth with disabilities, minorities, parents, youth with substance abuse issues) and tailor ILP programs to meet those needs.
- Increase outreach to mentors from the same racial/ethnic backgrounds as youth in care.
- Provide training to ILP staff in cultural competency and integrate more formal cultural awareness activities into ILP services.
- Continue to build substance abuse prevention/intervention activities as part of ILP services.

Involving Current and Former Foster Care Youth in ILP Service Delivery. While States increasingly recognized the importance of youth involvement—through youth advisory boards, newsletters, and workshops led by youth formerly in care, for example—several States reported challenges in keeping youth actively engaged.

Recommendations to Further Engage Youth in Helping to Shape ILP Activities:

- Encourage States to embrace a youth development approach that moves beyond occasional youth involvement to ongoing engagement of youth in the planning, development, and delivery of ILP services.
- Provide increased training and technical assistance (including peer-to-peer TA) around integrating youth development approaches, emphasizing youth strengths rather than deficits, and keeping youth engaged.

Collaborating with Other Agencies and Community Services. State ILPs increasingly turned to collaborative efforts with other State agencies, educational institutions, and community organizations to provide more youth with a wider range of services and to leverage local expertise.

Recommendations to Promote Increased Collaboration:

- At the Federal level, pursue interagency initiatives and joint program funding among HHS (including CB, FYSB, CSAP, and CMHS), DOE, OJJDP, HUD, DOL, and other relevant agencies for collaborative community programs that support youth exiting the child welfare system. Coordinate activities with ongoing foundation initiatives.
- At State and local levels, identify formalized mechanisms (e.g., interagency task forces, designated point person responsible for collaboration) to facilitate coordinated efforts.
- Promote involvement of private sector businesses in ILP activities (e.g., through job placement programs).

Conducting and Receiving Training. Training of ILP staff, service providers, mentors, and foster parents was perceived as critical to the provision of quality ILP services. Given the high turnover of child welfare agency staff and the array of issues that affect ILP, training should remain a priority.

Recommendations to Enhance Training Activities:

- Require formal training specific to youth development and ILP issues for child welfare agency workers and foster parents who work with youth populations.
- Expand opportunities for State child welfare staff, ILP service providers, and caregivers to receive specialized training in issues identified as challenges, including building and sustaining collaborative initiatives, working with special populations, integrating youth development approaches, providing aftercare services, demonstrating cultural competency, resolving transportation issues, and measuring outcomes.
- Integrate identified needs and areas for improvement as reported in the annual ILP final reports into the training work plans of The National Resource Center for Youth Development and other Children's Bureau training and TA providers.

Resolving Transportation Issues. Transportation was repeatedly noted as a barrier both to receiving ILP services and to effectively making the transition to self-sufficiency.

Recommendations to Help Resolve Transportation Issues:

- Examine State and local policies that create barriers to increased support of driver education for youth in care. Promote information sharing among States on policy and practice reform in this area.
- Build collaborative efforts between State child welfare systems and State/local departments of transportation.
- Explore opportunities for enhanced use of distance learning vehicles (e.g., Internet, CD-ROM, public television) to deliver ILP training, especially in rural areas.

Sharing Information and Promising Approaches. Further avenues of information sharing—through conferences, networking events, or electronic media (Web sites, listservs)—should be explored so that States can learn from each other and build from others’ achievements and “lessons learned.”

Recommendations to Facilitate Information Sharing:

- Leverage use of existing Web sites of the Children’s Bureau and its clearinghouses and resource centers (particularly the National Resource Center for Youth Development) to present information related to relevant research findings, program models, publications, and curriculum. Send periodic E-mail alerts to ILP Coordinators to notify them of new Web site features and announcements.
- Actively facilitate ongoing discussions among ILP Coordinators through use of list serves and newsletters.
- Continue to support the annual meeting of ILP Coordinators.
- Periodically update and disseminate information garnered through State final reports.

The review and analysis of 10 years of final reports set a foundation for understanding the first decade of ILP. Learning from the lessons evident in this study will help the program more effectively record and implement ILP activities that help prepare youth for successful independent living.